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AUTHOR Peterson, Gordon
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ABSTRACT

The ten reading research studies published since 1955 and deemed by the author "most important" in terms of quality, originality, and applicability to elementary reading instruction are described in this report. Discussed are studies on reading approaches by Russell Stauffer and by Neville Bennett; a study on reading readiness by Audrey Simpson-Tyson; word identification research by Theodore Clymer and by Robert Caken, Morton Weiner, and Ward Cromer; and reading comprehension studies by Marie Clay and Robert Imlach, Frederick Davis, John Guthrie, Francis Hunkins, and Robert Thorndike. The following conclusions are offered by the author: (1) more formal methods appear to be superior to less formal methods in producing reading achievement; (2) children may need an extended reading readiness period; (3) only phonic generalizations with 75% utility should be taught; (4) different skills exist in word identification and comprehension; (5) better readers process larger units than do poorer readers; (6) there are a limited number of distinguishable reading comprehension skills; (7) cognitive development is important in reading comprehension; (8) higher level questions have the greatest effect on the best readers; and (9) socioeconomic factors have an important effect on reading comprehension. (DF)

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The Ten Most Important Reading Research Studies Published During the Last 25 Years

Gordon Peterson
Northern Michigan University

As part of the celebration of the 25 year history of the Michigan Reading Association, I have been asked to briefly summarize and state the contributions of the ten most important reading research studies published during the existence of MRA, 1955-1980. Whenever one selects the "most important" it is indeed a gigantic and humbling task considering the hundreds of studies that have been published, but such a task is often important to help one gain general impressions.

In selecting the "most important" the following criteria were utilized: 1) To what extent was the study selected for publication by the staff of a reputable journal or publishing company? 2) To what extent was the study a sound research project? 3) To what extent did the study reveal rather new understandings or basic new trends? 4) To what extent were the results important for the teaching of reading in the elementary school?

READING APPROACHES

The culminating point of the many research studies published during the 1950s and 1960s on beginning reading approaches was The First Grade

Studies (Stauffer, 1967). The general conclusions of the twenty-seven individual studies were 1) reading instruction could be improved, 2) combinations of approaches were more effective than the use of a specific approach in isolation, 3) the outcomes achieved were related to the emphasis given (for example, in the programs that emphasized word identification more than reading comprehension the scores were higher in word identification than in comprehension), 4) word identification skills should be emphasized and taught systematically regardless of the approach used, and 5) future research should center on specific teacher, student and learning situation variables rather than on general aspects. The chief contributions of this study were it put an end to the discussion on the general merits of different approaches, it presented important conclusions, and it made suggestions for future research.

During the 1960s and 1970s there was considerable interest in the comparative effectiveness of formal and informal methods of teaching reading and the most influential single study was reported by Bennett (1976) who concluded that formal teaching fulfills its aims in reading achievement without harming goals in social and emotional development, whereas informal teaching only partially fulfilled its aims in the social and emotional area as well as having comparatively poor academic reading attainment. The results of this study made an important contribution by providing documentation about the comparative effectiveness of formal over informal measures.

READING READINESS

Representative of the many adequate studies in the area of reading readiness demonstrating the importance of general language development for some children (especially minority children) was conducted by Simpson-Tyson (1978) that involved the quantity and quality of the oral English of Native Americans (Crow and Northern Cheyenne Indians). The general conclusion was these children were not very verbal in many classroom situations and the implications where that teachers of language deficient children should provide school time to practice speaking English, they should withhold pupil reading of books until general language proficiency develops, and the teacher should read aloud many books. The general contribution of this study was that if children do not have adequate oral language abilities formal reading instruction should be postponed until the children have developed the prerequisite language abilities.

WORD IDENTIFICATION

Probably the most important word identification research study involved the utility of phonic generalizations. Clymer (1963) studied the extent to which the 45 most commonly taught phonic generalizations were applicable to at least 75% of the words read and he found that only eighteen (18) of the generalizations had enough utility (and only nine (9) of these were widely applicable). The study demonstrated many textbooks were teaching phonic generalizations that should not be taught and it lists those generalizations that had enough utility to be taught.

One of the many studies about the relationship between word

identification and reading comprehension was conducted by Oaken, Weiner, and Cromer (1971). The results were good word identification was not a sufficient condition for good comprehension and word identification training did not result in increased comprehension. The general extended contributions of this study were word identification and reading comprehension were different skills and ability in word identification did not guarantee ability in reading comprehension.

READING COMPREHENSION

To overly generalize, the reasearch in the 1950s and 1960s seemed to have been chiefly dominated by interest in beginning reading instruction and reading approaches, whereas the research in the 1970s was chiefly concerned with reading comprehension.

Among the most important developments during 1955-1980 was the research that demonstrated the importance of large units on reading comprehension (much of the research in the 1950s and 1960s dealt with words and letters whereas most of the research during the 1970s tended to focus on the sentence and paragraph). Among the studies that reflected this trend was the study by Clay and Imlach (1971) who found the better readers were processing cues at the story, intersentence, and sentence level, whereas the poorer readers were dominated by word, syllable, and letter levels.

A few researchers conducted factor-analysis studies in an attempt to determine whether reading comprehension involved a number of separate abilities or whether it was a rather unitary ability. Davis (1968), for

example, conducted a cross validated "uniqueness" analysis and found five skills, listed in order of the extent of variance which they predicted, as having a unique contribution to reading comprehension: 1) memory for word meanings, 2) drawing inferences from the content, 3) following the structure of a passage, 4) recognizing a writer's purpose, attitude, tone, and mood, and 5) finding the answers to questions asked explicitly or in paraphrase. The chief contribution was more emphasis should be placed on teaching the identified general skills instead of teaching many unverified specific skills.

One of the major developments during this time, based to a considerable degree on the growing influence of Piaget's developmental theory, was the research on the importance of cognitive development on children's reading comprehension. Among the many studies was Guthrie's (1973) where he found that children with normal cognitive development scored significantly higher than children of the same chronological age but with less than normal cognitive development and children who were chronologically younger.

Another important development during this period was the concern about the effects of questioning strategies. Hunkins (1969) was among those who investigated this problem and his findings were, in varying degrees, representative of the results of most other studies: higher level questions failed to produced significantly higher scores for the entire sample, but the students in the highest quartile reacted more favorably than pupils in the lower three quartiles. The chief contributions of this study were that not all students benefited from higher level

questions and the positive effects of higher level questions were related to the general intellectual abilities of the readers.

Thorndike (1973) reported the results of a cross-national comparison of the reading comprehension of students in countries of enormous sociocultural diversity and found 1) there were very large differences in the reading level between the developed and developing countries, 2) the best predictor of reading achievement was socioeconomic level, and 3) general factors about schooling were at best minimally related to reading achievement. The chief contribution of this study was it demonstrated that among the most important factors (and perhaps the most important factor) determining comprehension was the child's socio-economic-cultural-educational level.

SUMMARY

At the risk of giving overgeneralizations, it seems to me these studies either are or represent the "most important" reading research studies and it seems to me the following summary statements are warranted: 1) various approaches can produce children who can read, but probably the use of more formal methods will produce greater results than comparatively more informal methods, 2) children may need an extended reading readiness period, 3) only phonic generalizations with adequate utility (75%) should be taught, 4) word identification and comprehension skills are different and skills in word identification will not guarantee ability in reading comprehension, 5) better readers process larger units (paragraphs) whereas poorer readers process mainly smaller units (letters and words), 6) there

are a limited number (about five) distinguishable reading comprehension skills, 7) cognitive development plays an important part in reading comprehension, 8) higher level questions will have the greatest effect on the best readers, and 9) an important determinant of reading comprehension is socio-economic aspects.

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